Meet The Team:
Ms. Dawn Foy

When Dawn Foy talks about working with mules in the National Park Service, she isn't talking about the challenges of stubborn personnel who don't want to accept technological changes in the way transportation projects are funded and managed. She's harkening back to her earliest work with the Park Service, as a 'barge rat' on the C&O Canal. But we'll get to that in a minute.

"Dawn is an Information Management Specialist with the National Park Service (NPS), and a project manager for IT, working in the project management office for Information Resources. She has held a number of positions during her years with the Park Service, including park ranger, Washington and Regional Information Specialist, and Information Manager for first the Southwest and then Intermountain Regions. She is a certified Project Management Professional (PMP) and a Contracting Officer's Technical Representative (COTR). She notes that all of the project management team

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members she works with are PMPs, and several are COTRs. Each of the team members works from their homes; Dawn is based in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

"We're not so much hands-on IT support as we are project managers, all with a strong IT background," says Dawn. "We help people come up with solutions to their problems, and in addition we can manage the project to reach that solution."

Dawn says it's been awhile since she's done any coding or network wiring. "Back when I was with the Intermountain Region, I installed networks and did that sort of thing," she said. "But that was a good 12 years ago."

"We have contractors who write the code for systems," Dawn says. "I work on the requirements, talk to the end-users, do a lot of the testing, and write the documentation, but I don't do any of the actual code writing."

In her present position, Dawn's typical day at work just isn't... um....typical. "It's a wide variety of tasks, and that's what I like about it," she says. "A typical day for me might involve two or three short conference call meetings about the Financial and Business Management System (FBMS), a call from a regional person asking about pulling data from PTATS (see below), mixed with some calls from people who just need some help getting something done." Dawn is also working with the Department of the Interior SharePoint site, which generates additional calls and e-mails.

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Dawn's involvement with the national parks and the outdoors goes back to an early age. She was born in Santa Ana, Texas, but her father's work with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service soon took the family to a refuge in South Carolina. He was then transferred to a research position at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Maryland, where Dawn spent the majority of her early years.

Her first memory of being in a national park property was a family visit to Assateague Island National Seashore when she was seven. "I remember being in love with the ponies," she

says. And from ponies she moved to mules, and some of her best memories with Park Service programs.

"During college...this was back in the 8os...I got a summer job as a 'barge rat' in the living history program on the C&O Canal," Dawn says. "I was in the Great Falls, Maryland, area. I dressed up in the long dresses, and all of that, doing the mule skinning, and working on the barge. It was great fun for a college kid."

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When asked if she played any pranks on fellow barge rats, Dawn claims that she was probably the "prank-ee," rather than the prankster.

"I was the smallest person on the barge team," Dawn recalls. "The group had one thing they liked to put me up to, because of my size. Many of the visitors to the C&O Canal expressed sympathy for the mules because they had to pull the barges. The truth is, the mules weren't working very hard at all. To demonstrate this, the other barge rats would have me pull the barge out of the lock by myself, just to show the visitors that the mules weren't being overworked."

It's a long way from mule skinning to Dawn's proudest achievement in her work with the NPS: the development of the Park Transportation Allocation and Tracking System (PTATS). And, as with so many projects we're drawn to over the years, it began with a casual conversation…for Dawn, during a ski trip.

"I was on a ski trip with Dave Keough and some other friends. Dave had heard that I was working at the Washington Office (WASO)," recalls Dawn. "He asked if I would like to help with a 'little problem they were having.' When I asked for more of a description, Dave referred to it as 'the spread-sheet from Hell.'"

Dawn briefly described the former system, officially known as the Master Budget Sheet (MBS). "The Park Roads and

Parkways Program had these spreadsheets that they would mail around between all of the regions, the divisions, and headquarters. The spreadsheets listed all the projects that everyone wanted to do, and how much funding would be required for each project. And as you can imagine, the sheets would get out of date very quickly, and you'd have several versions floating around. And this was 'the little problem' Dave mentioned."

Today Dawn describes the solution to that 'little problem' as PTATS, the fund allocation system used by both the National Park Service and Federal Lands Highways for the Park Roads and Parkways Program (PRPP). (See the separate article about PTATS on this month's NPS Transportation site front page.) But beyond acting as a tool to manage money across all of the different projects in any given year, PTATS assists with managing the projects themselves.

"The PTATS system requires certain documentation before funds can be expended," Dawn says. "It has checks and balances built into it. So overall, PTATS is both a funding and management system."

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Dawn adds that, while the rules for documentation were in place before the development of PTATS, there was a challenge with who could "see" project agreements, who could review them. "PTATS allows for the central storing of electronic documents so that anyone in the Park Service or Federal Lands Highways can view the necessary documents," says Dawn. "It has provided a lot more accountability and openness."

Dawn credits the initial team of Dave Keough (IMR), Dave Kruse (PWR), and Mark Hartsoe (WASO) as being the impetus for getting PTATS developed. "Mark Hartsoe was able to give us the support we needed, both financially and from the WASO level," says Dawn. "But in addition to that—and this is important—Mark let the regions take the lead. He really supported this as a grass-roots effort. This is totally different

from the way I've seen most systems developed, where they come down from on high, and don't take into account what the people administering the program on the ground really need."

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Dawn said that the Federal Lands Highways program was a partner in PTATS from the very beginning. She also credits Gina Moriarty, who used to manage the Administrative Finance System (AFS), and Helen Price, who manages the Project Management Information System (PMIS), with helping to move the PTATS program forward. "We had to jump through a lot of hoops with security, and we didn't have a lot of agreements in place between the various groups. So we just spearheaded the whole effort. I had security people saying, 'Hey, you can't do this!' But we did it."

Dawn points to other positive attributes of PTATS. "Mark Hartsoe likes to tout that PTATS allows the PRPP to hit a

99% obligation rate each year," she said. "Prior to the development of PTATS, they couldn't get their funds obligated as efficiently, so they had a much lower obligation rate. And Congress is always looking at programs, and saying 'We gave you this money, how come you haven't spent it?'"

When the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) came along in 2009, the PTATS once again proved its worth.

"We did some scrambling and altered PTATS to allow ARRA projects to be tracked the same way we track PRPP projects," said Dawn. "It let the Park Service and Federal Lands Highway folks quickly get their requests in, and allocate the funds quickly. As a result, their obligation rate for ARRA projects was very high."

The project-tracking feature of PTATS also came into play with ARRA projects. "We had the means to track and report back, because there was a great deal of additional scrutiny over the dollars with the ARRA program," Dawn said. "To this day, I'm still doing a monthly report for Federal Lands Highways on the expenditures, because they are tracking it to the pennies."

Dawn says that many Park Service units and programs, as well as staff in other government agencies, aren't even aware of PTATS. "Mark Hartsoe's game plan all along was to keep it pretty low-key," she says. "But I was surprised to hear a comptroller for the Intermountain Region discussing PTATS in a recent meeting, defending its operation and pointing out that it integrates the NPS and Federal Lands Highways.

She added that a February 2010 GAO report carried a quote about the Park Service and its efficiency in tracking funds and projects. GAO said:

 "We also found the NPS project tracking system to be the most robust system of its type within the bureaus evaluated...In fact, FWS (US Fish and Wildlife Service), itself, has seen this tracking system as a promising practice and is currently developing software to match NPS capability."

Dawn sees lots more opportunities and challenges for developing links between PTATS and other NPS management systems. "Too many systems waste your time by basing decisions on what we've always done, without looking at why you do those things," she said. "So then you're just incorporating bad prior practices. The whole idea of defining your business requirements and business practices should be that you look at what you really need—is there a financial reason, or a congressional reason—and then you go from that point. You're not basing your decisions on what you've always done."

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When she puts down the phone, turns off the e-mail, and sees a clear space on the calendar between IT and SMAC-FHLP meetings, Dawn likes to pursue camping, hiking, birding, and traveling with her family. "We're headed to Peru this summer to visit the Amazon Basin and the Cusco Valley," she reports.

Maybe she'll have a chance to do some mule-skinning during the trip. Or take a look at how the Peruvians are handling their IT tasks.